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Holder, Napolitano, Clapper: We're safer post-9/11

By Eric Holder, Janet Napolitano and James Clapper

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All of us who are old enough remember exactly where we were on September 11, 2001, at the moment we first learned that terrorists had taken control of commercial jetliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center in Manhattan, the Pentagon, and a field in Shanksville, Pa.

On that day, our lives, our country, and our world fundamentally changed.

Today, a decade later, we remember the loss of the nearly 3,000 innocent victims of the attacks, honor the firefighters, police, and many other first responders, who showed such courage and conviction on that tragic day, and take stock of the fundamental changes that have reshaped our country and improved security for all Americans. While there are no guarantees — and there never will be — we have accomplished much to minimize the risk that a successful terror attack like 9/11 will ever occur on American soil.

Ten years ago, our intelligence and law enforcement communities were aware of potential threats to the homeland from terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, but we lacked the focus necessary to anticipate and prevent the attack. Sharing essential information to confront this threat was impeded by long-standing cultural, legal and institutional barriers, stove-piped government organizations, and a lack of coordination and cooperation.

In the decade since 9/11, an unprecedented international partnership has emerged. Together, the United States and our allies have captured or killed most of those responsible for the events of 9/11; we continue to pursue those who remain at large; and the organization that orchestrated these attacks, while still a serious threat, has been significantly weakened.

Today, we are working together as never before to share information, tactics, and training to fight terrorists and prevent them from putting their plans into practice, while affirming our support for security, prosperity and universal rights around the globe. We owe a great debt to our men and women in uniform who are working tirelessly and effectively in many places around the world to protect us from harm.

At home, we have made equally important strides to build the capacity to protect our country and the American people in an age of rapidly evolving threats, and we have made critical enhancements to our nation's counterterrorism capabilities.

New federal agencies like the Director of National Intelligence and the National Counterterrorism Center, and a robust information-sharing environment, have strengthened analysis, improved terrorist watch lists and databases, and created a "need to share" culture, leading to enhanced coordination, tools, and capabilities. Indeed, the entire Intelligence Community is producing better intelligence than at any time in history.

In 2009 and 2010, as a result of investigations by the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, more defendants were charged in federal court with the most serious terrorism violations than in any two-year period in our history. And the Department of Homeland Security, created in 2003 as part of the largest reorganization of the federal government since the start of the Cold War, is working daily with its federal, state, local, tribal, and private sector partners to enhance the security of communities across the country. One recent study found that between 1999 and 2009, 86 terrorist plots against Americans have been foiled.

Our nation has continued to strengthen and expand information sharing, intelligence, and public awareness efforts since 9/11. We have supported the creation of 72 state and local fusion centers, where information about threats can be gathered, analyzed, and shared among federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector partners. We have expanded the number of Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) around the country from 35 to 104 and increased the number of JTTF personnel from roughly 1,000 to nearly 4,500. In addition, the Justice Department has implemented a series of far-reaching legal, structural and cultural changes over the past decade, including the creation of the Department's National Security Division and the FBI's National Security Branch, to more effectively combat national security threats through intelligence.

We have established a new Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative, which trains law enforcement across our country to recognize behaviors and indicators related to terrorism-related crime. It also standardizes how those observations are documented, analyzed and shared.

We have worked to engage the broadest possible set of partners in security by expanding the "If You See Something, Say Something™" campaign, a nationwide effort originally implemented by New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, to increase public awareness and the reporting of suspicious activity to the authorities.

In short, we have created a much stronger framework for managing threats to our nation. The capabilities that we have today are far greater than what existed 10 years ago, and they have helped us thwart numerous terrorist plots, from the attempt to bomb New York City subways to the foiled attacks against air cargo, Times Square, and a parade in Seattle. And these capabilities continue to contribute to the security of the American people every day.

Make no mistake: Our nation is stronger and more secure than it was on 9/11, better prepared to confront the challenges we face, and more resilient than ever before. But despite these improvements, we do not have the luxury to rest on our laurels. There are still terrorist groups around the world who wish us ill, and are plotting attacks against us.

Our success in confronting these threats in the future will depend on those who work on the frontlines, day and night, at home and abroad, to keep us safe. As important, it will depend on the American people and our collective determination to stand firm against threats, united in our resolve, free from fear, and resilient should we be attacked again.

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